

Canopies of Blue: The American Airborne Experience in the Pacific in the Second World War as a Case Study in Operational Art and Multi-role Flexibility

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Abstract

CANOPIES OF BLUE: THE AMERICAN AIRBORNE EXPERIENCE IN THE PACIFIC IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR AS A CASE STUDY IN OPERATIONAL ART AND MULTI-ROLE FLEXIBILITY by MAJ Channing M. Greene, Jr., US Army, 60 pages.

As America's collective memory of the Second World War fades, popular history books and the entertainment industry have filled the knowledge gap with accounts from the European Theater. A resurgence in works focusing on the war in the Pacific has surfaced in recent years, but the topic still requires a fresh perspective. In particular, the American airborne experience in the Pacific presents a field ripe for exploration.

This historical monograph argues that a careful review of the operations involving the 11th Airborne Division, the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, and the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion reveals a measure of foresight on the part of those who designed campaign plans in the Pacific. General Joseph Swing's implementation of the para-glider concept in the 11th Airborne enabled his unit to perform a variety of tasks including amphibious operations, parachute drops, and POW camp raids. The Allies' only independent parachute regiment in the Pacific, the 503rd, successfully employed the combined arms concept in its capture of Nadzab and set the conditions for the Allied reduction of Japanese defenses around Rabaul. The United States Marine Corps' short-lived experiment with airborne forces revealed the usefulness of units in multi-role functions, but ultimately betrayed an inability to execute actual parachute drops because of logistical limitations in the ocean environment.

Herein lies a promising heritage. While most Americans maintain a short historical memory, today's military strategists can draw on past successes rather than bemoan an alleged lack of operational skill. Despite the fact that many in today's military planning community consider American attempts to operationalize national strategy a dismal failure, the airborne experience in the Pacific Theater in World War II provides a positive example for a successful operational tradition. Furthermore, case studies of this nature may hold implications for future force structure in the U.S. Army's Airborne and Air Assault Division / Brigade Combat Team (BCT) units, and how U.S. military planners incorporate airborne units into operational objectives and regional plans.

As a nod to the para-glider past in the Pacific, a consolidated air transportable division, including parachute and heli-borne units, could meet the need for a strategic and operationally flexible force package. As they have in the past, situations will arise that require the deployment of units marked by a certain cultural prestige and a visible, forceful presence. From a regional perspective, parachute troops remain a highly useful and practical capability for nations with littoral interests. While it may take years for China to develop a sophisticated and globally-projected force, it holds the potential now to deploy robust, brigade-sized troops to various points in the Pacific Basin. In a positive sense, this could mean a greater degree of peace-keeping involvement on the part of the Chinese in troubled areas like the Solomons or the Marshalls. However, recent events in Tibet indicate that rosy outcomes are unlikely to follow from Chinese interventions any time soon. Major shifts in the Chinese political environment must precede any positive developments in either law enforcement or military operations. In either case, rising powers will continue to watch and emulate U.S. military actions and its forthcoming expeditionary force structure.

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Introduction

The 60th Anniversary of the end of World War II came and went in 2005 and left many Americans with varied visions of the role of the United States in that conflict. As is usually the case, those pictures and stories that are most familiar arise from the American military experience in Europe--Pearl Harbor, Iwo Jima, and the scene of the final surrender in Tokyo Bay notwithstanding. The exotic and distant nature of the war in the Pacific still shrouds a story that needs emphasis and revisiting, especially when most popular historical accounts continue to focus on Europe's Western Front.

The particularly American fascination with the airborne soldiers of World War II follows the general trend of emphasizing the European theater. In addition to misunderstanding the origins of the airborne arm of the military, most Americans read history that focuses on the popular battles of World War II and believe that the airborne soldier enjoyed a romantic role in the European Theater. Indeed, accounts of D-Day, Market Garden, and Bastogne dominate the scene, leaving the impression that the 101st, 82nd, and 17th Airborne Divisions existed as the sole executors of successful parachute and glider operations in the war. The historical record and the relatively unknown experience of thousands demonstrate otherwise.

With the notable exception of Bastogne operation, which even then employed the 101st in a strictly ground role, the Allied Airborne experience in Europe met with few planned successes. MARKET GARDEN, the brainchild of the usually cautious General Bernard Montgomery that attempted to pry open the back door of the Ruhr with airborne forces in September of 1944, never stood a chance in the face of a post-Normandy reconstituted German Army. The following year, the 17th Airborne Division's participation in VARSITY proved a troublesome and unnecessary afterthought to a conventional crossing of the Rhine. This combined British and American parachute drop focused on seizing the rail junction of Wesel in order to prevent German interference with the main river crossings. However, planners most

likely overestimated the objective's importance. Periodic successes, including the scattered drops during OVERLORD, came normally as the result of operational and tactical mishaps with the added benefit of disorganized German defenses. It would appear that a good measure of serendipity and unintended deception saved the day for the paratroopers of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, most of whom landed literally miles from their designated drop zones on the Cotentin Peninsula of France. In contrast, airborne units in the Pacific Theater not only planned and executed successful combat jumps that met specific objectives, but managed to skillfully augment conventional forces in long-term campaigns. The Marine 1st Parachute Regiment, the 503rd Airborne Regimental Combat Team, and the 11th Airborne Division executed textbook airdrops, engaged in successful POW rescue operations and assumed occupation duties in former Japanese-held territory. The hostile climate and austere living conditions further differentiated the Pacific paratrooper's experience from that of his ETO counterpart.

For these reasons, the American airborne experience in the Pacific presents a field ripe for exploration and focused study. However, the topic holds even more potential. A careful review of the operations involving the 11th Airborne, the 503rd, and the Marine airborne experiment reveals a good measure of foresight on the part of those who conceived and designed campaign plans in the Pacific. Herein lies a promising heritage, and while American historical memory remains woefully shallow, today's strategic thinkers in the military need not bemoan a historical lack of operational forethought. Despite the fact that many in today's military planning community consider American attempts to operationalize national strategy a dismal failure, the airborne experience in the Pacific Theater in World War II provides a positive example for a successful operational tradition. Furthermore, case studies of this nature may hold implications for future force structure in the U.S. Army's Airborne and Air Assault Division / Brigade Combat Team (BCT) units, and how U.S. military planners incorporate airborne units into operational objectives and regional plans. The topic is relevant and timely and the following brief overview

of the development of the historiography of the field will bring the case studies into a clearer focus.

Renewed interest in the Pacific continues to emerge. Recent popular forays into the world of the Pacific Theater speak to a positive trend in the field. Hampton Sides' work in *Ghost Soldiers* shed much-needed light on the plight of the Pacific P.O.W. and the unconventional efforts to rescue those in the Japanese camps. Hollywood's *The Great Raid* boosted the effort with an interesting back story that, while fictitious, managed to convey realistically the state of affairs for civilian prisoners in Manila suffering under Japanese occupation.¹ However, the periodic and sensational camp raid fails to offer a clear picture of day-to-day ground operations in the Pacific and the overarching campaign to free the Philippines from Japan's grip. Examining the scholarly work in the field may shed more light on how the historical profession has treated the era and the region.

Taken as a whole, the historiography of American airborne forces in the Pacific remains more of a phantom than a traceable lineage of studies. An initial comprehensive study of the subject simply does not exist. In its place, individual unit histories written in the decade following the end of the war form the body of work on airborne tactics and operations. Veteran-historians like E.M. Flanagan wanted to capture details of certain operations and collective experiences for division and regimental associations. Flanagan wrote his first account of the 11th Airborne's experience *The Angels* in the mid-1950s, using letters and interviews from General Joseph Swing and his own war diary as a captain in the division's artillery battalion to compile a chronological narrative of the division's combat history in the Pacific. It remains the most detailed and relatively uncontested history of the division. However, even the updated version from the 1990s fails to provide a good strategic grasp of the 11th's overall place in General Douglas MacArthur's

¹ Hampton Sides, *Ghost Soldiers: The Forgotten Epic Story of World War II's Most Dramatic Mission* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

plan for the Southwest Pacific. Moreover, Flanagan glosses over the emerging operational connections between his division and the 503rd and his separate account of the latter unit entitled *Corregidor* is again narrowly focused.²

The period from the 1950s to the 1960s introduced *The U.S. Army in World War II* series. Known as “The Green Books,” the collection covered the Pacific narrative in discrete segments with ample attention paid to grand strategy and individual campaigns. Extant volumes contain ample information and analysis of campaigns that included airborne units.³ Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the Center for Military History failed to produce a comprehensive study of airborne operations as it has done for such discrete topics like amphibious operations, logistics, and medical services.

With the approach of important World War II anniversaries and doctrinal revisions in the U.S. military, the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s saw a resurgence of historical work in the field of American airborne operations. The authors of the studies in this period devoted most of their work to chronological narratives, unit heraldry, or the evolving role of air mobility. They also leaned heavily on the European experience.⁴ As a result, each of the studies achieved their purpose in informing the American public of the role that parachute and glider forces played in the war, but the resulting historical narrative presented far too narrow a picture of airborne development.

² E.M. Flanagan, *Corregidor: The Rock Force Assault, 1945* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 331.

³ M. Hamlin Cannon, *Leyte: The Return to the Philippines* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1954), 420. Robert Ross Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1963), 756.

⁴ William B. Breuer, *Geronimo!* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), Gerard M. Devlin, *Paratrooper!: The Saga of U.S. Army and Marine Parachute and Glider Combat Troops during World War II* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 717. , E. M. Flanagan, *The Rakasans: The Combat History of the 187th Airborne Infantry* (Novato, CA.: Presidio Press, 1997), 392. , E. M. Flanagan, *The Angels: A History of the 11th Airborne Division* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1989), 422. , James A. Huston, *Out of the Blue: U.S. Army Airborne Operations in World War II* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Studies, 1972), 327.

Despite receiving little attention, American Airborne units in the Pacific performed remarkably well. This paper examines the reasons for the American success from several standpoints. Three characteristics distinguish the performance of American Airborne units in the Pacific from similar units in Europe. First, leadership styles differed markedly. The commanders of the 11th Airborne Division, the 503rd Regimental Combat Team, and the 1st Marine Parachute Regiment saw their role as integrators of the overall “airborne” concept—defined as the tight partnership and shared vision among parachute, glider, and conventional forces. Second, airborne units destined for the Pacific underwent different training regimes that benefited from lessons learned in Europe. Finally, the Pacific airborne units executed a mission set that ranged from combat jumps to amphibious landings to Prisoner-of-War rescue missions, allowing the units to claim numerous successes as part of a “jack-of-all-trades” strategic reserve.

The topic of this paper encompasses three distinct units. The 11th Airborne Division, the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, and the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion made vital contributions to the first American amphibious operation in the war at Guadalcanal, the ground combat campaign in the Philippines, island airfield seizures, liberation of P.O.W. camps, and the subsequent occupation of Japan after the surrender in 1945. Although each of these units possess moderately detailed combat histories of their own in one form or another, none of those histories offer the large-scale context that would place their contributions in terms of the Pacific Campaign as a whole, the wider war, and potential contributions to future force structure and capabilities. Each of the units hold interest as military subjects themselves, but are best shown as units who made important contributions to the airborne concept, doctrine, and the realities involved in combining parachute and glider forces. The 503rd operated as the only independent parachute regiment in the U.S. Army in World War II, yet it seldom conducted operations without the direct support and assistance of regular ground forces. Its closest modern equivalent would be today’s Ranger Regiment whose battalions serve as highly deployable, airborne strike forces. Successful jumps by the 503rd in World War II ushered in the American doctrinal concept of airfield seizure,

a specified task now in the mission statement of each of today's Ranger Battalions. The 503rd's much larger brother in the Pacific, the 11th Airborne Division, became the first airborne unit to conduct a nighttime parachute jump during stateside training. Its only commander during the war, General Joseph M. Swing, participated in the first American combat jumps in the war during Operation HUSKY and later advised the Army's Chief of Staff in matters involving the future use of airborne forces. While in the Philippines, the 11th Division's flexibility and adaptability created a unique heritage which enabled the unit's postwar structure to adapt to occupation duties, independent parachute combat teams (most notably, in the form of the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team in Korea), and a future as the U.S. Army's testing specimen for the Air Assault concept in the early 1960s.

Unlike its Army brothers, one parachute unit of Pacific fame failed to survive the war as an active outfit. The 1st Marine Parachute Regiment deactivated in 1944 after successfully serving the Marine Corps as a raiding unit and special missions force during operations on Guadalcanal, Choiseul Island, and Bougainville. And unlike its counterparts in the Army, this Marine unit never experienced a combat parachute jump. However, the fact that these Marines never actually jumped in the Pacific should not detract from their history or make them irrelevant for this case study. To the contrary, the Regiment's experience underscores the importance of mingling special capabilities with those of the more conventional kind in order to round out an effective combat team. Appropriately, the unit's teamwork and its incumbent leadership techniques serve as the starting point for this study of American airborne operations in the Pacific Theater.

This study begins by examining the United States Marine Corps' brief experiment with organic parachute units in the period from 1942-43 as seen in the light of early Allied operations in the Solomon Islands. Second, the paper addresses the leadership style and combat experience of the commander of the 11th Airborne Division who learned vital lessons from the dismal outcome of HUSKY I in Sicily in July 1943 and went on to shape his division to meet the needs

of the Pacific Theater. Next, an analysis of the 503rd PIR's jump into Nadzab in September of 1943 addresses the topic of lessons learned from the failures at Sicily during the prior summer and provides a clear example of success in vertical envelopment—indeed, the first success of its kind for the U.S. in the war. The final section deals with the combat experience of the 11th Airborne Division whose success in the Philippines executing combined operations ushered in a legacy that lives to this day.

Operations in the Pacific Theater in World War II provide the basis for an excellent case study in the use of elite American units in the context of the region. The topic remains timely and relatively unexplored. While popular histories, Hollywood feature films, and numerous documentaries continue to focus on the exploits of the All American Division and the Screaming Eagles in the European Theater of World War II, the memory of their “blue water” brethren fades. In many ways, American airborne operations in the Pacific Theater paved the way for how the U.S. Military formulates current doctrine and mission planning. In present-day Iraq, Americans continue to tout the necessity of maintaining flexible and responsive forces as mission parameters change. Moreover, the fight involves not only the Army, but a synchronized effort with Navy, Air Force, Marine, and Coast Guard forces. This marriage of effort finds its roots in the experience of the Pacific in World War II. There, the silk parachutes of the airborne force gently delivered men to the ground who knew intimately the dangers of operating without the full cooperation and assistance from their sister services.

This study also offers a word of caution. We do well to remember the Pacific airborne experience in that this heritage provides a template for future training and preparations for major combat operations. Global projection remains the name of the game and airborne operations will have an undisputed role in future conflicts. World powers with regional security interests continue to step up efforts to equip and train specialized forces with parachute and air assault capabilities—a reminder that the U.S. Military must look to the future and do the same.

Little Drop Zone, Big Ocean: The Marine Airborne Experiment

The summer of 1940 appeared to have ushered in a new craze for the employment of parachute troops and no service seemed immune from the fever. In the aftermath of the successful German airborne operation that conquered the fortress of Eben Emael in Belgium, the United States Marine Corps decided in needed to get in on the “vertical envelopment act.” Colonel Pedro A. del Valle, the Marine Corps’ acting director of the Division of Plans and Policies, wasted no time in issuing the order from the Commandant to begin planning.⁵ The fact that the order came so quickly—arriving at Marine bases on or about 15 May—and from such a high level was a testament to the clear potential for parachute operations envisioned by service leadership. The call also extended beyond just the desire to see silk canopies in the sky. Corps Commandant Thomas Holcomb also recognized that the recent operations in Belgium made almost exclusive use of gliders.

However, for all of this planning and preparations to employ airborne troops in combat in World War II, the Marine’s parachute regiment never experienced a jump or glider landing in the face of enemy fire. Instead, the various battalions found themselves augmenting raider units, conducting diversionary raids, and taking part in a fair share of amphibious landings. In the wider scheme of operations, shortcomings in Marine Corps logistics and infrastructure prevented the parachute battalions from experiencing their full potential as airborne troops. But under no circumstances did the resulting situation fall short of expectations. The Marine parachute units filled an operational niche in the Pacific that called for augmenting raider battalions, launching diversions, and the use of more rigorously trained Marine infantry for amphibious assaults. Put simply, the type of combat that Marine para-glidersmen experienced fell right in line with the pre-

⁵ Jon T. Hoffman, *Silk Chutes and Hard Fighting: U.S. Marine Corps Parachute Units in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps History and Museums Division, 1999), 1.

conceived notions of Corps leadership. The story of these airborne Marines confirms the notion that flexibility and adaptability must remain inherent qualities for any specialized force.

The full-scale development of an airborne capability in the Naval service meant that the Plans and Policies Division at Headquarters USMC in Washington could not simply take a formulated plan off the shelf. The idea was new and it required a fresh emphasis on procurement, training, and staging. Therefore, collecting the necessary hardware for parachute units in the Naval service would prove a difficult task, especially when troop transport aircraft, rigging equipment, and glider development fell under the Army's purview. These issues, in addition to the question of personnel training, became the chief obstacles to Marine employment of parachute units in the early stages. In addition to seeking outside help from Army sources, the Marine Corps Commandant requested detailed reports from the naval attaches in Germany, Russia, and France.⁶ The Plans and Policy Division then offered several recommendations regarding the roles and missions of Marine airborne units. The memo included three main points: the Marine parachute battalions would 1) act as reconnaissance and raiding forces; 2) spearhead invasion forces in much the same fashion as an advance force; and 3) occupy positions of tactical advantage as a self-sustaining combat formation.⁷ Although these recommended roles held throughout 1940, the Marine Corps would eventually modify them to such an extent that the parachute unit would become a truly multi-role, ready-for-anything outfit.

In most cases, the first platoons of parachutists found themselves to be qualified both to jump and to rig equipment. The Marine Corps realized it needed more personnel who knew at least something about the equipment and Marine aviation proved to be the only source of ready and able volunteers for parachute duty. The air services had long experience with parachutes and

⁶ John Harold Johnstone, *United States Marine Corps Parachute Units* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1961), 1.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

parachute training as classes of aviators and riggers learned the concept. The arrangement also paid dividends in terms of available infrastructure as the Corps used the Naval Parachute Materiel School in Lakehurst, New Jersey to train the initial slate of classes.⁸ Slowly, the personnel available for assignment to airborne duty grew to meet the specified requirements of one parachute company for every infantry battalion. In the meantime, Marine Corps doctrine began changing to fit the parameters of a potential war in the Pacific.

The Pacific Theater required unusual methods and imaginative ways of overcoming distances. Ronald Spector, in his study of the Pacific War in *Eagle Against the Sun*, suggests that U.S. Naval leadership was slow to recognize the logistical nightmare that the open ocean presented, leaving their Marine brethren to mull over an exhausting list of contingencies.⁹ Marine planners at the Division of Plans and Policy considered the potential for the use of Marine parachutists in the oceanic environment and their new recommendations would change the parameters significantly. In March 1941, letters to the commanding generals of the 1st and 2nd Marine Divisions spelled out the changes. The first paragraph acknowledged the fact that “there will be occasions when the use of parachute troops as such will be impracticable” and emphasized the language in the original concept which specified that a parachute battalion would be “a unit equipped and trained for any type of duty that may be required of it.”¹⁰ The remainder of the letter laid out the potential mission set for the parachute units, specifically mentioning landing operations, combat patrolling, scouting, intelligence, sabotage, and combat engineering.¹¹ While the terms themselves could be viewed as overly ambitious, they enumerated the various roles that the Marine Corps envisioned for an all-purpose force. The expense of attempting to

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ Ronald Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War With Japan* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 208.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

train every Marine in this manner would quickly prove overwhelming, so the natural and most commonsense approach was to use the new parachute forces.

Other considerations also drove the planners to reconsider the use of the parachute forces. Not everyone in the Navy and Marine Corps approached the airborne operation with unbridled enthusiasm. In fact, considering that another doctrine in its infancy, amphibious warfare, suffered from its own growing pains in this same period, it is a wonder that the parachute idea ever escaped the concept stage. Despite the Commandant's enthusiasm for the idea, officers in Headquarters, USMC proved reluctant to commit the time, effort, and funds into what many considered a "crash program." Planners adopted a realistic view of the situation as a choice between a dedicated parachute force and a flexible team of well-trained Marines who were available for a variety of missions. The demand for personnel in the regular divisions and air wings was such that every Marine dedicated to a specialized task removed yet another crucial component of combat power from an emerging amphibious force. The established role of the Marine Corps in World War II stole precedence from all other roles in competition.¹²

Despite the setbacks, the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion managed to take part in its first tactical deployment in August 1941. With Major General Holland Smith commanding a two-division landing force, the Atlantic Fleet commenced its first large-scale landing exercise of the year which included a plan to drop one Marine parachute company onto a crossroads on the forward edge of the landing area. The plan stipulated that the parachute unit secure the avenues of approach and then attack the enemy opposing the landing of the Army's 1st Infantry Division.¹³ Smith, who harbored doubts about a full-scale operation that failed to include an actual opposing force, ordered that a solitary squad from the already dropped company return to the nearby

¹² Kenneth J. Clifford, *Progress and Purpose: A Developmental History of The United States Marine Corps, 1900-1970* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, HQ USMC, 1973), 70.

¹³ Hoffman, *Silk Chutes and Hard Fighting: U.S. Marine Corps Parachute Units in World War II*, 14.

airbase, re-equip for another jump, and land in the rear areas of his corps.¹⁴ The resulting mayhem, which included everything from severed communications wires to “liberated” vehicles, proved highly instructive more in the realm of training for security of vulnerable rear areas than it did for the doctrine of the Marines’ newly-minted airborne force. Holland Smith reserved his praise for the combined nature of Lieutenant Colonel Merritt Edson’s Mobile Landing Group, and included the parachute company and one Marine tank company, which added an element of surprise in the overall landing operation. Smith’s enthusiasm for the idea became a recommendation that two-division landing forces incorporate one regiment each of parachute and air-landed infantry.¹⁵ His foresight and willingness to contribute constructive ideas in the area of parachute and air-landed forces demonstrated that the Marines’ tactical commanders were beginning to warm to the idea of airborne troops. It was well they did, since validation of the concept in combat was less than a year away.

The next summer arrived and brought with it two major battles, Coral Sea and Midway, and the momentum in the Pacific had shifted. The time had now come for land forces to make their mark. In the midst of feverish preparations to land on Guadalcanal in only a few weeks time after arriving in New Zealand, the Marine 1st Parachute Battalion appeared to be the least “green” in terms of maneuver experience. Rehearsals conducted at the end of July 1942 indicated that the fresh recruits in the 1st Marine Division lagged behind in terms of basic skills even though the Marines of the Parachute Battalion themselves had never executed a seaborne landing.¹⁶ In all likelihood, naval leadership had handpicked Vandegrift in order to infuse strong leadership in an

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶ Stanley E. Smith, *The United States Marine Corps in World War II: The One Volume History* (New York: Random House, 1969), 150.

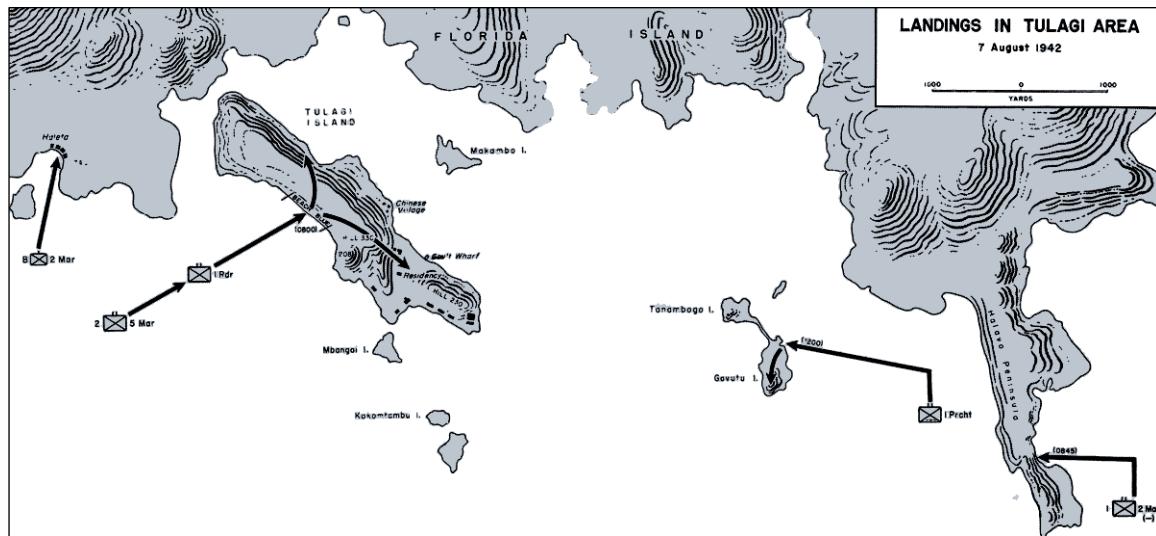
operation often dubbed SHOESTRING.¹⁷ Intensive, individual training and participation in large-scale exercises in the States also helped make up for the difference. In addition, a small percentage of the noncommissioned officer ranks within the 1st Parachute Battalion included “Iceland Marines” who were former members of the 6th Marine Regiment stationed in the Atlantic in early 1942 to deter a possible German assault.¹⁸ Since the threat never materialized, the 6th Marines returned to the States only to become draft fodder for the new raider and parachute units. Perhaps planners took this into account when they assigned the difficult mission of seizing the Gavutu and Tanambago Islets, by way of seaborne invasion, to the 1st Parachute Battalion as part of the larger assault on Guadalcanal in August. In all probability, the lack of transport aircraft and the fact that the few planes that were available could never hope to make the grueling round trip between New Zealand and the Solomons with a full load of personnel greatly dampened the expectations for an airborne raid in the Guadalcanal operation. Even as the plan stood, the Marine parachutists could not assault Gavutu until H plus four hours due to the resource intensive Tulagi operation.¹⁹ This would be a difficult amphibious assault. Not only planes, but landing craft were in short supply. Vandegrift himself understood the implications of this shortfall and knew it would take more than a few waves to reinforce any toe holds on D-Day.²⁰

¹⁷ Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II: The Struggle for Guadalcanal, August 1942-February 1943* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), 15.

¹⁸ Hoffman, *Silk Chutes*, 5.

¹⁹ Frank O. Hough, Verle E. Ludwig, and Henry I. Shaw, *Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal: History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II, Vol. I* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1958), 56.

²⁰ Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 191.



Map 1—Landings in the Tulagi Area, 7 August 1942 used by permission from p. 62, John Miller, *United States Army in World War II The War in the Pacific Guadalcanal: The First Offensive*

The planners gave the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion a critical, and rather dangerous, mission. Securing Gavutu-Tanambogo would allow the larger divisional force to concentrate on maneuvering on Guadalcanal. However, the four hour delay in execution meant that the first waves of Marines faced an alerted Japanese enemy. Progress during the initial assault on both islands proved slow as paratroopers disembarked from landing craft and faced geographic realities. The causeway joining the two small land masses proved just long enough to prevent rapid reinforcement. Resistance on Tanambogo increased as the invasion progressed to the extent that, by nightfall, General Vandegrift had ordered two battalions of his reserve to augment the parachutists and the company of regular Marines at the two islands.²¹ Throughout the next day, well-coordinated and aimed naval gunfire managed to destroy several Japanese positions among the hills of Tanambogo while infantry cleared defenses that ringed the terrain features. Marines taking part in capturing the small “Slot” islands managed to catch a glimpse of the future of the

²¹ Hoffman, *Silk Chutes and Hard Fighting: U.S. Marine Corps Parachute Units in World War II*, 6.

fight in the Pacific. The Japanese propensity to defend “buttoned-up” and away from exposed beaches made its first appearance during the assault on Gavutu-Tanambogo and Marine parachutists were among the first to realize the potentially devastating tactics.²² The Raiders also faced the same coral cave systems at Tulagi during their initial assault landing, but Japanese techniques on the main island of Guadalcanal rapidly devolved into massed charges and raids.

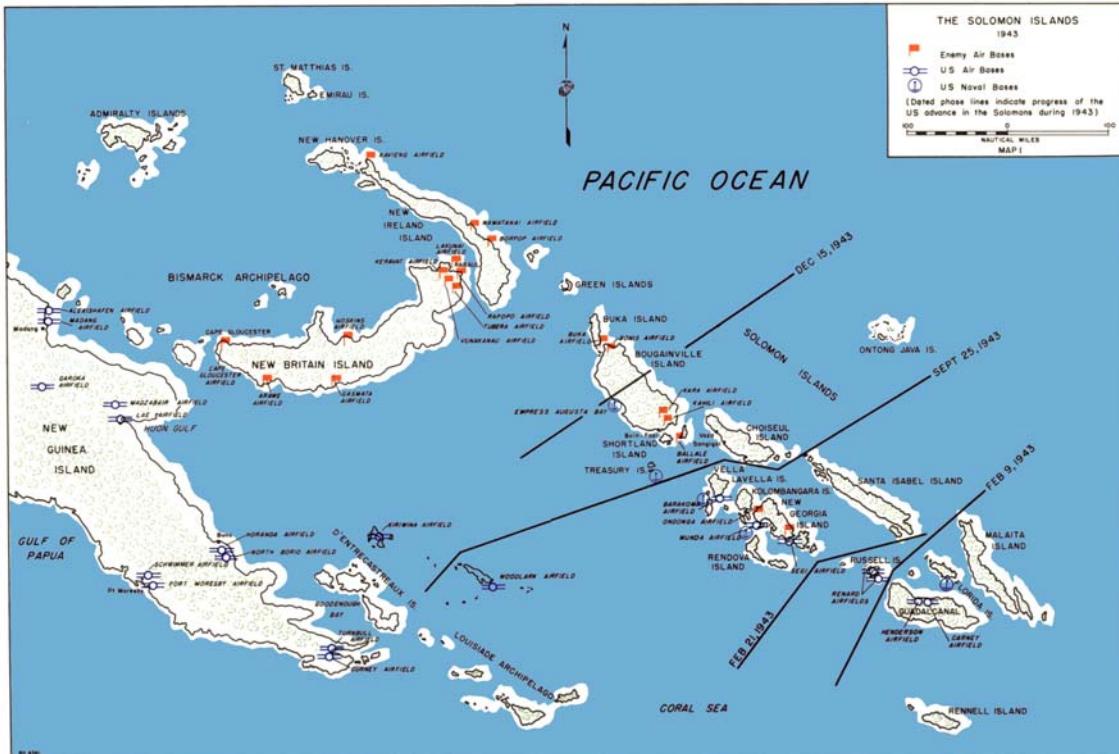
In the fight for Gavutu and Tanambogo, the 1st Parachute Battalion lost its first commander, Major Robert Williams, to wounds suffered on Gavutu. His successor, Major Charles Miller saw the rapid depletion of his combat power over a three-day period. As a result, the unit moved to Tulagi to await missions to augment Edson’s Raider Battalion. The parachutists then took part in a raid on Japanese supply areas on Guadalcanal and successfully defended Lunga Ridge during the two nights that Edson fought for control of Henderson Field.²³ Subsequent withdrawal to Noumea, New Caledonia meant that the 1st Parachute Battalion would refit, complete further training, and receive company in the form of two new battalions to the fledgling Marine parachute force.

The arrival at Noumea of the 2d and 3d Parachute Battalions ushered in a new stage in the life of the parachute Marines. The various units now formed a nearly complete regiment (the planned 4th Battalion remained in a training status at Camp Pendleton until deactivated at the beginning of 1944), constituting a force deployable on its own.²⁴ Essentially, the formation of the regiment fulfilled Holland Smith’s recommendations from the stateside exercises that Marine divisions be equipped with a parachute force of this size. In theory, better training and more centralized control in combat would result. Pacific Marine planners could now explore options that employed the parachutists in roles involving a relative degree of independence. For various

²² Hough, Ludwig, and Shaw, *Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal: History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II, Vol. I*, 41.

²³ Ibid., 40.

reasons which the end of this chapter will explore, the planners dismissed several opportunities for actual parachute drops at this stage of the Pacific Campaign and instead chose to employ the 1st Parachute Regiment in a diversionary role.



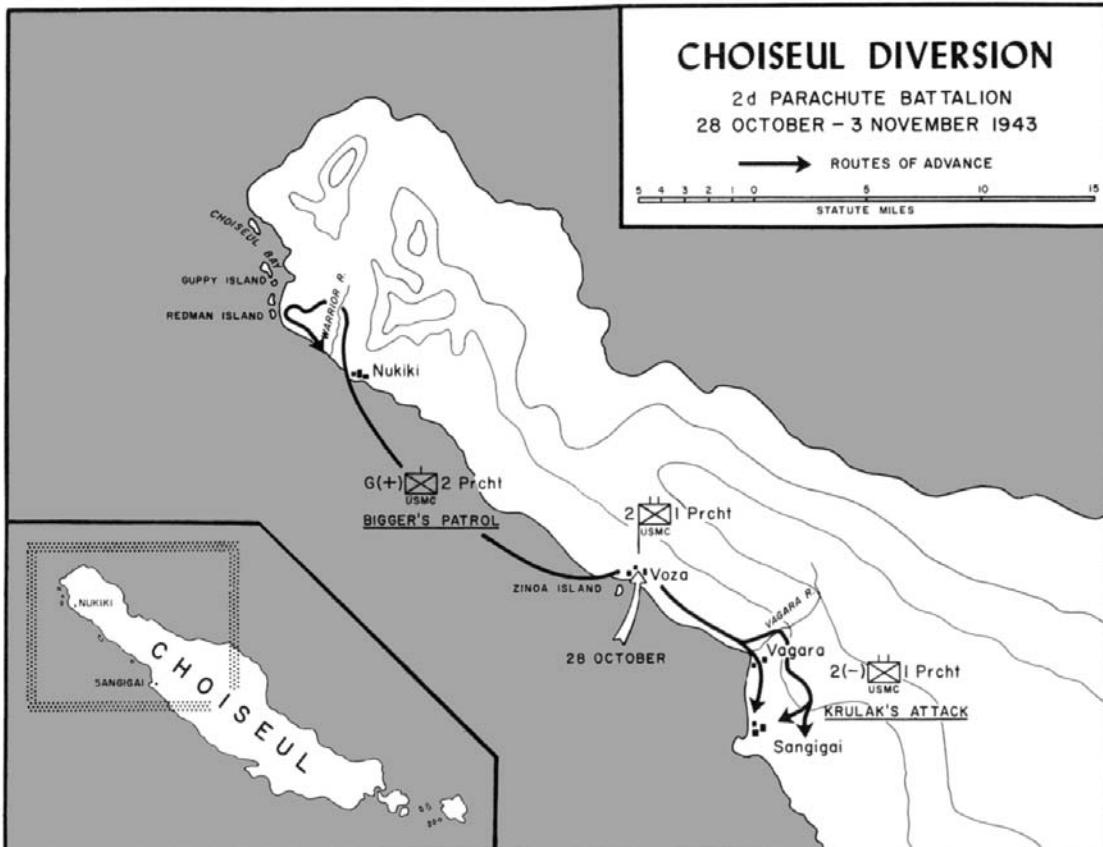
Map 2—The Solomon Islands, 1943 used by permission from p. 5, John Rentz, *Bougainville and the Northern Solomons*, USMC Historical Monograph, Historical Branch, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1946

As the neutralization of the Japanese base at Rabaul continued to occupy the minds of Allied planners, MacArthur realized that the key to air-basing in the Central Solomons would be the capture of Bougainville.²⁵ Since both ends of the island contained Japanese strongholds, the central Empress August Bay region on the western side of the island appeared to offer the most promise for seizing terrain and creating air bases from scratch. In order to allay Japanese suspicions of an invasion on the island, I Marine Amphibious Corps (I MAC) staffers

²⁴ Johnstone, *United States Marine Corps Parachute Units*, 4.

²⁵ Louis Morton, *United States Army in World War II—The War in the Pacific: Strategy and Command, The First Two Years* (Washington, D.C.: Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1962), 400.

recommended a raid on the small, nearby island of Choiseul. Though the idea originated with Admiral William Halsey, I MAC had refined the concept and turned it into a useful feint.²⁶ Its location to the east of Bougainville's coast also played into the diversion even if the Japanese still suspected an attack on the larger island. The I MAC planners considered the parachutists a suitable and available unit for the purpose of the diversion.



Map 3—Choiseul Diversion, 2d Parachute Battalion, 28 October-3 November 1943 used by permission from p. 196, Henry Shaw and Douglas Kane, *History of US Marine Corps Operations in World War II Volume II: Isolation of Rabaul*

Along with a heavy machine gun platoon and an experimental rocket platoon from I MAC's weapons company to reinforce the deception, the 2d Parachute Battalion conducted the

²⁶ Ibid., 534.

diversionary raid.²⁷ The amphibious landing occurred at night along with several more diversion-reinforcing measures. Admiral Halsey's press liaison issued a story concerning an actual parachute invasion and one participating newspaper included a picture complete with hand-drawn parachutes descending on a Pacific island.²⁸ In addition, just prior to landing on the target beach, the 2d Battalion placed dummy supply boxes—appearing as air-dropped parcels—north of the landing area in order to set off a Japanese reaction to the diversion. The preparations paid dividends in terms of arousing Japanese attention to Choiseul. At least one Japanese regiment occupied the island and set about attempting to track down the Marine invaders. After nearly three days of cat-and-mouse tactics, I MAC withdrew the raiders at a cost of 11 dead and 14 wounded.²⁹ The Empress Augusta Bay invasion was now in full swing and the diversionary force had served its purpose.

The Choiseul Raid offered several intended, and unintended, consequences. While the operation came rather late in the planning for the invasion of Bougainville, the parachutists managed to cut lines of communication across Choiseul, preventing reinforcement of Japanese positions in the north that held the potential to damage efforts at Empress Augusta Bay. Japanese heavy bombers focused their efforts on Choiseul instead of the Allied forces marshalling off Bougainville. There remains little doubt that Japanese commanders in the region suffered from confusion after receiving conflicting reports in the area and began to fear additional raids involving air-dropped personnel in the Central Solomons and elsewhere.³⁰ The commander of the Japanese 17th Army on Bougainville, Lieutenant General Haruyoshi Hyakutake, likely became more convinced that the action on Choiseul would be followed by an invasion of southern

²⁷ Hoffman, *Silk Chutes and Hard Fighting: U.S. Marine Corps Parachute Units in World War II*, 25.

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ Ibid., 25.

³⁰ Ibid., 28.

Bougainville.³¹ A focused defense became increasingly difficult. In the end, the Marine parachutists damaged Japanese prospects of a centrally-controlled and coordinated effort to defend the ever-constricting Allied belt around their largest airbase in the Southwest Pacific.

Despite these varied successes, the I MAC commander, General Vandegrift, never warmed to the idea of specialized troops in his ranks. They suffered from rapid depletion during sustained combat and required extensive re-fitting and training when not deployed. Vandegrift realized that part of the problem rested in sheer capacity. The Marines simply lacked the infrastructure and logistical train to sustain plans for airborne operations. Although several opportunities to conduct combat jumps materialized over the course of the Pacific War from 1942-43, I MAC planners could not rely on aircraft availability and faced daunting ocean mileage between objectives. Based on feedback from I MAC, the Division of Plans and Policy specified the proximate reasons for the failure to use parachutes in their intended role in a memorandum in August 1943:

- 1) The lack of sufficient lift capacity. Not more than six of the VMJ (transport) squadrons could be concentrated by Marine Corps Aviation for a single operation, permitting possible transport of only one reinforced battalion.
- 2) The lack of shore-based staging areas for mass flights.
- 3) The long distances between objectives.
- 4) Objectives assigned to the Marine Corps were generally small in area and densely defended, thereby being unsuitable for mass parachute landings.³²

Ultimately, the victors at Guadalcanal never reaped the benefits of a parachute operation. Large-scale amphibious operations taking place on a near-weekly basis occupied busy staffs and consumed an already strained logistical tail. As the Commandant-designate, Vandegrift envisioned a future Corps without such specialized units and made his belief clear to Admiral Ernest King in December 1943. The end was not completely final. To be sure, several Marine

³¹ John Miller, *United States Army in World War II—The War in the Pacific: Cartwheel, The Reduction of Rabaul* (Washington, D.C.: Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1959), 241.

³² *Ibid.*, 26.

parachutists went on to participate in combat jumps. A number of them signed on with the Office of Strategic Services and jumped into occupied France while two officers participated as observers with the Army's 503rd in the Nadzab operation.³³ Marine parachute veterans also saw extensive ground combat at Iwo Jima, most notably flag raisers Henry Hansen, Ira Hayes, and Harlon Block.³⁴

The Marines brief foray into the realm of vertical envelopment began with an ambitious desire to emulate the success of foreign forces. However, mere idolizing of the German *Fallschirmjager* ideal—which included imitating his strange, spread-eagle door exit posture—found little direct translation to maritime realities. The Marines had already set a plan in motion to claim an almost singular role for itself in the island-rich Pacific environment. Amphibious operations ruled the emerging Corps doctrine and had staked out a large chunk of territory at Marine planning desks in Washington. Attempting to merge the seemingly disparate capabilities, enthusiastic and optimistic officials tailored the role of the parachutists to include availability for landings and whatever other missions suited the combat commander's fancy. The idea worked to a certain extent, especially when parachute units had experienced training gauntlets and their Marines had been together long enough to develop esprit-de-corps and tight cohesion. The battalions experienced a fair amount of combat and accomplished important operational objectives for I MAC.

The Marine Corps' traditionally small size and relatively lean structure revealed the negative side of the equation. While the Corps could make use of existing facilities in the form of aviation and materiel bases in the states, the insatiable demand for trained personnel in theater and the requisite aircraft to transport the battalions required a much larger capacity. Even as

³³ Johnstone, *United States Marine Corps Parachute Units*, 7.

³⁴ Hoffman, *Silk Chutes and Hard Fighting: U.S. Marine Corps Parachute Units in World War II*, 38.

Marine acquisition specialists managed to design a glider variant for the Corps' use, they quickly realized that just the requirements to transport the glider in the Pacific theater outweighed the benefits. Late to the show, the Army realized this conundrum early in 1945 as the parts and pieces of glider kits sat collecting mold at logistics bases far from the Philippines. As it was, constructing one of these "transportable" planes required the labor of nearly 200 man hours.³⁵ Compared to assembling an air-dropped 75mm pack howitzer which came in seven crates, the daunting task of piecing together a flyable machine simply proved too much for the Marine Corps logistical system. Mission planning came with its own headaches. Glider operations in the Pacific taxed the patience of airborne staffs, hence the reason for just their one solitary use in combat in that theater. Post-Guadalcanal, General Vandegrift gave voice to the obvious. Outfitting Marine units with gliders, parachutes, and rip cords during an amphibious war became a costly proposition. The few instances of flexible employment failed to justify the expense of upkeep. However, the entirety of the Marine airborne experiment was not all for naught.

The parachute battalions had planted a seed. The Marines' World War II airborne experiment proved that a certain capacity did indeed exist, albeit in a very limited fashion. Present day Force Reconnaissance units have that tradition to thank for their existence. As Marine roles and missions continue to transform and interweave with those of the U.S. Army, an airborne capability matches with current needs across the gamut of "full-spectrum" operations. Also, the increasing demand for Special Operations capabilities also meshes quite nicely with an organic ability to train and equip a specialized airborne force. As the leadership of the Marine Special Operations Command begins to grope for a coherent and specified role in the world, it must seek through its traditions and find a suitable legacy. Perhaps the exploits of their forbearers in the Pacific in World War II provide just that. To be sure, the Marines were not the only ones struggling with a fledgling airborne doctrine. One year after the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion

³⁵ Ibid., 38.

assaulted the beach of Gavutu, the Army would conduct its first airborne experiment in the laboratory of Europe.

Corcorans vs. Leggings: Adaptive Leadership in Building the Para-glider Team

The 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions still exist in both their physical and mythical forms today. Popular histories focus on these two units as their fame emerged from the large World War II operations of Normandy and Holland. Indeed, these divisions comprised the first elements of the American Airborne force at the beginning of World War II and, in the case of the 82nd, deployed relatively early in the war. However, these two units initially suffered from several shortcomings. Both of them began their existence as the first units to participate in the American airborne experiment. Personnel problems plagued the initial build-up of parachute regiments as the standards for accepting new personnel for parachute training had not been publicized or for that matter fully understood. In many instances, members of a pre-existing division simply volunteered for parachute duty in order to escape their old unit and experience something new. Making full use of the no-questions-asked policy, many of these recruits simply quit after realizing that the workload and training schedule entailed something much greater than what they first expected. A parachute regiment then lost the core of its manpower and the Airborne Command had to then shuffle the personnel of already established units in order to make up for the shortfalls. The dangers inherent in this ad-hoc system rose to the surface at an early stage, leaving the two newly-formed divisions to make do with the result. Adding to the complexity was the issue that Airborne Command assigned regiments as they finished training and failed to develop a coherent assignment system that accounted for the immediate needs of the new divisions.³⁶ The airborne regimental system catered more to the regiment-sized unit than it

³⁶ John T. Ellis, *The Airborne Command and Center, Study no. 25* (Washington, DC: Historical Section, Army Ground Forces, 1946), 12.

did the airborne division. Thus, the 82nd and 101st found it extraordinarily difficult to forecast troop requirements and training schedules necessitated by future deployments to Europe.

For these reasons, the paratroopers of the Pacific begin to stand out from their brethren who would venture to the other side of the world. The 11th Airborne Division, activated in February 1943, would reside on a new training post in North Carolina.³⁷ Their freedom to train without the burden of preparing simultaneously for immediate deployment paved the way for a period of highly intensive training and focus by senior Army leadership. The 11th became the first of the initial airborne divisions to start fresh without the personnel constraints and issues prevalent in the 82nd and 101st. In addition, the 11th's leadership would soon gain operational experience without having to subject the entirety of the division to combat.

The commander of the 11th Airborne Division, General Joseph M. Swing, embraced the airborne concept. Highly focused on emerging doctrine and tactics, Swing devoted a great deal of time to the study of the employment of airborne forces and was anxious for operational experience. While planning operations in North Africa and the Mediterranean, Eisenhower sought out Swing's talents and assigned him as his airborne advisor for planning the invasion of Sicily.³⁸ The invasion called for complex considerations of Army, Navy, and Air Corps employment. In order for a combat parachute landing on Sicily to succeed, each of the service branches needed to coordinate closely their individual efforts. Despite Swing's attempts to advise the Operation HUSKY I planners on proper airborne employment, the mission came with a high price. During reinforcement operations on 11 July, parachute regiments from the reserves in North Africa suffered 10 percent casualties after Royal Navy ships fired on the C-47 formations.³⁹ Swing attributed the high fratricide rate to poor communication among Air Corps and Navy personnel

³⁷ Flanagan, *The Rakkasans: The Combat History of the 187th Airborne Infantry*, 26.

³⁸ Flanagan, *The Angels: A History of the 11th Airborne Division*, 34.

with the latter group insisting on the use of complex air corridors and a shoot-on-sight aircraft engagement rule in darkness.⁴⁰ The casualty count from the 82nd's drop did not sit well with Army leadership. Even General Dwight Eisenhower, writing to the Army's Chief of Staff from North Africa, made known his loss of confidence in the airborne division concept after studying the results from Sicily.⁴¹ Realizing a need to assess the results of HUSKY I, General George C. Marshall assigned Swing the task of reporting on the operation and investigating the causes.⁴² His assessment and subsequent report would later prove vital to Swing as he prepared the 11th for deployment to the Pacific.

Swing's judgments would make their way into the Army staff studies immediately following the war. The Weapons System Evaluation Group (WSEG) No. 3 included portions of Swing's report and thus provides an adequate framework with which to examine airborne operations during this period. The failures of Sicily shaped Swing's initial airborne experiences and Operation HUSKY I serves as a good starting point for comparing and contrasting the airborne experience of the European and Pacific Theaters.

Judging the relative merits and resulting success or failure of an airborne operation required the examination of several factors. The airlift assets, any supporting service contributions to the airborne effort, and the final contribution of the parachute drop to the overall outcome of the operation all combine to form a picture of the mission—successful or unsuccessful. WSEG No. 3 defined airlift success as: "a high degree of accuracy and concentration of a large proportion of troops delivered is achieved with light troop losses and

³⁹ Andrew J. Birtle, *WWII Campaigns, Sicily 1943* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, CMH Pub. 72-16, 1993), 15.

⁴⁰ Albert Garland and Howard Smyth, *United States Army in World War II—The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Sicily and the Surrender of Italy* (Washington, D.C.: Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1965), 423.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 425.

maximum air destruction and obstruction of the movement of enemy material and personnel.”⁴³

The actual parachute drop met success with a “perfect performance if all its objectives were seized and held at the planned time.” How did the mission fare overall? WSEG pointed to success in this context: if the airborne operation “accomplishes its planned purpose, and the success of the operation measured in terms of the accomplishment of ultimate purpose, was dependent on the performance on the airborne forces.”⁴⁴

HUSKY I proved to be an airlift failure. The troop carriers pilots did not drop the paratroopers accurately and in adequate masses to facilitate the success of the overall mission. From this conclusion, the rest of the dominos fall. The 82nd troopers involved in the operation achieved little in the way of ground success and missed the crucial assaults on their objectives. Casualties incurred in the initial air operation also meant that the 82nd was rendered ill-prepared to execute follow-on operations immediately in theater.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, HUSKY I permitted the eventual advance of Seventh Army through Sicily. With the bulk of the troops landing between the beaches and the German reserves, German forces found it difficult to discern the Allies’ inland objectives. In general, the confusion and mass numbers of parachutes tended to amplify the overall effect in much the same fashion as the future Allied invasion of Normandy and the prior German airborne operation in Crete.⁴⁶ In each case, the attacker adopted the more negative view of the operation. Overall, the paratroopers achieved an operational victory, albeit at great cost.

⁴² Devlin, *Paratrooper!: The Saga of U.S. Army and Marine Parachute and Glider Combat Troops during World War II*, 212.

⁴³ Weapons System Evaluation Group, *WSEG Staff Study no. 3: Historical Study of some World War II Airborne Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: World War II Operational Documents Collection, Combined Arms Research Library, 1951), 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁶ Garland and Smyth, *Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, 424.

While HUSKY I had thrown the first hints of doubt into the airborne equation, Swing's review would paint a positive picture, looking at the failure from the perspective that operations are complex and require detailed study. He voiced the most optimistic opinion of all the reviewers of HUSKY I and maintained that the Allied airborne forces could have acted decisively in the invasion of Sicily. His recommendation called for a different employment. Instead of separately tasking four distinct regimental operations to support the seaborne invasion, Swing advocated the consolidation of the units for a mass attack into the heart of Sicily.⁴⁷ Lieutenant General Lesley McNair, commander of Army Ground Forces (AGF), argued from the opposite standpoint as a commander who was far less optimistic about the airborne concept. HUSKY I convinced him of the impracticality of handling large airborne units, so he recommended that parachute units be no larger than battalion-size. In the end, Swing's reasoned arguments convinced Marshall and Eisenhower that the airborne division still deserved a role which included parachute regiments.⁴⁸ The emerging ideas of closely combined arms and mass were beginning to take shape in the realm of airborne doctrine. Both the 503rd PIR and 11th Airborne Division would make use of the lessons and employ airborne doctrine to an expert degree in the Pacific Theater.

The 11th was different from the other airborne divisions. As opposed to the normal divisional construct of two parachute regiments and one glider regiment, the 11th maintained the opposite ratio. Actually, the 11th adhered to the original concept for the airborne division. Both the 82nd and 101st started this way, but changed structures later to meet perceived operational needs in Europe. In order to maintain the glider-heavy structure, Swing established a principle that followed the 11th through its service in the war and greatly increased the unit's capability.

⁴⁷ Flanagan, *The Angels: A History of the 11th Airborne Division*, 35.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 36.

All personnel in the division would qualify for both parachute jumping and glider landing.⁴⁹ In some measure, Swing's dictum helped to compensate for the morale imbalance caused by the rift between plainly-dressed glidermen and the ever-fashionable paratroops. Despite the persistence of the myth from that era, the Army had already solved the issue of equal "extra" pay for both airlander and jumper. However, the perception of airborne favoritism persisted and Swing sought to improve the climate in the 11th by extending the training to everyone in the Division. In the fall of 1943, the 11th opened parachute training to clerks, cooks, mechanics, and other combat service specialties.⁵⁰ In order to fulfill his requirements, General Swing obtained AGF permission to establish a jump school at Camp Polk and later in New Guinea, and allowed glider troops the same opportunity to receive jump wings. Many gliderman volunteered for the training because they viewed parachuting as safer than glider landings. The 187th and the 188th were the 11th's two glider regiments and the race to become fully qualified for every circumstance was on. Though not fully parachute qualified until much later, the 188th became the army's first "para-glider" unit with this distinction.⁵¹ The term itself was a Swing innovation and the moniker quickly made its rounds in the airborne community. The Division Commander's unorthodox approach paid off when operations in the Philippines rarely included actual glider landings in combat.

Swing eventually achieved his goals. In a report dated 20 April 1945, the AGF Board released a complete rundown of the 11th Airborne's qualification statistics.⁵² The report laid out the numbers with respect to the two glider infantry regiments, the 187th and 188th, and then by

⁴⁹ War Department, *Records of the War Department's Operations Division 1942-1945* (Washington, DC: U.S. G. P. O., 1991), 889.

⁵⁰ Flanagan, *The Angels: A History of the 11th Airborne Division*, 75.

⁵¹ David W. Dengler, "The Small Change of Soldiering: The 188th Glider Infantry Regiment" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1998), 5.

⁵² Ibid. 23-24.

individual company in order to demonstrate the successful results of Swing's training regimen. Prior to deployment to combat in the Philippines, the two glider regiments included approximately 1100 parachute-qualified enlisted men compared to the 511th PIR's 1800.⁵³ In relative terms, this meant almost near parity with respect to jump trained personnel among an airborne division's infantry regiments. Consensus among airborne leadership at the time held that airborne divisions in every theater required principally parachute regiments.⁵⁴ To fulfill the perceived need in Europe, Airborne Command shuffled 500-series units in and among the 82nd and 101st. Not willing to deal constantly with a revolving-door personnel system, Swing had accomplished on his own what ETO planners took two years to complete for the 82nd and 101st. The report also noted for the edification of airborne planners in the states that Swing's equitable distribution of gliders among the division's regiments allowed each of them to plan personnel drops while enjoying the luxury of air-landing heavy equipment by glider—a special capability previously reserved only for glider-borne units.⁵⁵

The situation warrants discussion here. The 11th's use of air-landing troops demonstrated a penchant for flexibility not fully realized by the airborne divisions in Europe. That flexibility proved to be a mixed blessing. From the point of view of the glidermen in the 187th and 188th Glider Regiments, the Division never fought according to doctrine. The 11th violated frequently the established procedures to accomplish its missions, though less of its own accord than from above. As opposed to being a theater reserve, the division regularly remained in combat for extended periods as infantry, and the 188th never performed its airborne missions. Doctrine stated that commanders should not use airborne units when other forces could accomplish the same

⁵³ Army Ground Forces Board--Southwest Pacific Areas, "Army Ground Forces Board Report: Organization of Para-Glider Infantry Units," p. 1, Headquarters, USAFFE.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 1..

objective.⁵⁶ After all, airborne divisions possessed half an infantry division's authorized strength and commanders had to prevent wasting an airborne unit's unique abilities. Senior leaders ignored this advice, and the 11th frequently found itself thinly stretched when accomplishing its various tasks. Of lesser importance, the division disregarded doctrine when it failed to practice planned parachute drops, and received aerial re-supply from division liaison aircraft rather than from the Troop Carrier or Air Transport Commands.⁵⁷ However, these failures demonstrated the need for flexibility rather than rigid adherence to principles. The 11th Airborne frequently violated these maxims and missions as the situation forced modifications, and in some cases, complete disregard of established procedures. Although the army rarely employed the individual 188th member's parachute or glider training, the division's airborne status solved numerous problems such as supplying forward units, providing artillery support, and care of wounded, and gave glidermen important skills that they could use in the Philippines' rough terrain.⁵⁸ In essence, operations in the Pacific provided ample license to experiment with unit structure and employment. However, before Swing's 11th Airborne had the opportunity to put its innovations to the test, the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment would be first in line to make the most immediate use of the many lessons learned from the 82nd's initial experience in Sicily. As one of only two independent parachute regiments in the American arsenal during the war (the other was the 509th in the Mediterranean), the 503rd would execute an airborne operation in its most classic form.

⁵⁶ US Army, *Field Manual 31-30 1942: Tactics and Techniques of Air-Borne Troops* (Fort Benning, Georgia: U.S. Army Infantry School, 1942), 13.

⁵⁷ Army Ground Forces, *Para-Glider Units*, 11

⁵⁸ Dengler, *The Small Change of Soldiering: The 188th Glider Infantry Regiment*, 4.

First in the Fight: The 503rd Parachute Infantry at Nadzab

Coming on the heels of the Marine Corps' conclusions about the employment of its own airborne forces in August 1943, Army leadership still needed a solid example upon which to base their judgments of airborne warfare. The results of the 82nd Airborne Division's attempt over two days in July to establish a secure zone on Sicily soured the prospects for any future success. As fortune would have it, the 503rd was making ready to execute the first airborne operation in the Pacific Theater just as HUSKY in the Mediterranean came to a close and Marshall's airborne review board, chaired by General Swing, was convening. With the 503rd's arrival in the Southwest Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur now possessed a valuable asset to facilitate his three-pronged approach—the close partnership of sea, air, and land forces—to warfare in the theater. He employed a concept of quickly seizing airfields that, in turn, provided the air cover for subsequent amphibious assaults. Since the idea rested on the premise that if ground-based aircraft could launch from captured island airstrips they could assist in the strike on the next island, a parachute force might prove to be a suitable element of surprise and capture airfields as needed. Focused on New Guinea, MacArthur needed a base of operations from which to launch an invasion in that portion of the Pacific. The Japanese airstrip at Nadzab on New Guinea would be the starting point.⁵⁹

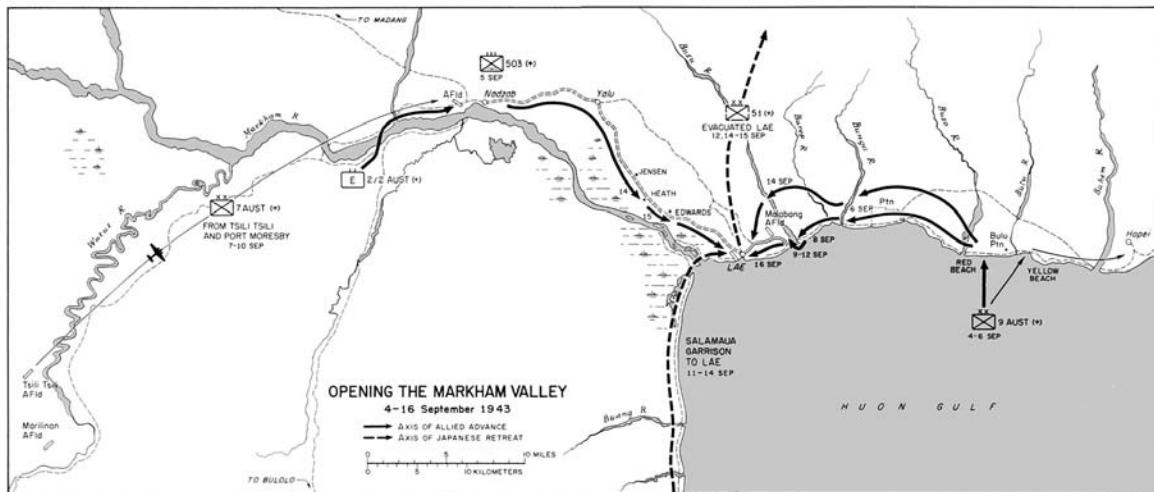
⁵⁹ D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur: Volume II, 1941-1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 324.



Map 4—The Huon Peninsula and the Straits used by permission from p. 189, John Miller, United States Army in World War II *The War in the Pacific CARTWHEEL: The Reduction of Rabaul*

Crucial not only in terms of its good airstrip, Nadzab proved to be key terrain along the Markham River Valley which ran west from the Huon Peninsula. New Guinea contained two major waterways—the Markham and Ramu Rivers. While the Markham ran southeast to the Huon Gulf at Lae, the Ramu ran northwest to the Hansa Bay between Wewak and Madang. The two rivers formed the basis of a valley separating the Huon Peninsula from the remainder of New Guinea. The valley created the most trafficable passage to the Japanese bases of Wewak and Madang along the northern coast of New Guinea. Nadzab, in the hands of the Allies, effectively blocked the valley route and at the same time provided an airstrip from which the Fifth Air Force could launch bombers and fighter aircraft toward Rabaul and Wewak.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ James Philip Lowe, "Nadzab (1943): The First Successful Airborne Operation," (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2004), 24.



Map 5—Opening the Markham Valley, 4–16 September 1943 used by permission from p. 204, John Miller, *United States Army in World War II The War in the Pacific CARTWHEEL: The Reduction of Rabaul*

MacArthur and his air chief General George Kenney flew to Port Moresby to join the 503rd in its final preparations and oversee the execution of the parachute operation. MacArthur surprised the Australian commander, General Vasey, with a visit to the 7th Australian Division Headquarters shortly after arriving in Port Moresby. Although MacArthur and Vasey were congenial and collaborated on some of the planning details, varied intelligence reports led to disagreement over Japanese troop strength on the objective. The Australian Division's intelligence officer speculated that the Japanese had recently reinforced the area and boosted their numbers to something near five thousand. Army staff offered an estimate of nearly seven thousand. MacArthur thought it was much smaller, around fourteen-hundred.⁶¹ While the actual strength was about two thousand, MacArthur had the advantage of having information gained through signal intelligence made available to him through his staff of cryptanalysts known as the Central Bureau.⁶² It may have been even more important from an air perspective as Kenney also

⁶¹ Ibid.10.

⁶² Edward Drea, *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War Against Japan, 1942–1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), xii.

used Bureau-supplied analysis to target Japanese aircraft on the ground prior to Allied landings.⁶³

“Triphibious” success rested on an intelligence-driven foundation.

The 7th Australian Division published its operations order on 27 August. Vasey intended to secure Nadzab in order to conduct offensive operations against Lae and to prevent the Japanese from sending reinforcements up the Markham Valley. He assigned the 503rd the following tasks:

1. Capture area Nadzab - Gabmatsung - Gabsonkek on Z-Day -- object covering preparation of a landing strip.
2. Establish road block across Markham Valley Rd. in area of junc. Rd and track 445546 -- object preventing enemy movement into Nadzab along this road.
3. Prepare landing strip on site of present Nadzab emergency landing field with utmost speed.⁶⁴

The 503rd's commander, Colonel Kenneth Kinsler, assigned Lieutenant Colonel John Britten the task of landing 1st Battalion directly onto the Nadzab airstrip and clearing it of enemy troops. Intelligence reports indicated that few enemy existed there and Kinsler would need Britten's men for other follow-on missions. Britten's battalion would start the preparation of the airstrip until relieved by the Australian engineers. Kinsler directed 2nd Battalion to land north of the airstrip to secure Gabsonkek and provide flank protection for 1st Battalion. Third Battalion would drop east of the airstrip and secure the village of Gabmatzung. The village lay directly along the most likely Japanese avenue of approach. However, Colonel Kinsler counted on the 9th Australian Division to attack the Japanese from the east and thus keep them occupied.⁶⁵

Close coordination and cooperation with Army Air Corps assets during the Nadzab operation proved essential to the successful outcome. B-17 bomber crews from the Fifth Air Force made it regular practice to work alongside the parachute troops and assist in their mission planning. As a result, ground commanders made detailed observation flights before the start of

⁶³ Ibid. 83.

⁶⁴ Ibid.11.

⁶⁵ Australian Military Forces, *Operation Order no. 5, Operation OUTLOOK, 27 August 1943* (New Guinea: Headquarters, 7th Australian Division, 1943), 5.

major operations. During preparations for Nadzab, Colonel Kinsler, the three battalion commanders, and several regimental staff officers made a high altitude reconnaissance flight over the jump area in a B-17 on 30 August.⁶⁶ The fact that Kinsler's leadership undertook this rather bold staff ride provides further testament to Central Bureau's intelligence assessments and Kenney's subjugation of Japanese airpower. MacArthur himself would accompany the Troop Carrier Wing in his own B-17 *Bataan* on the day of the actual jump.⁶⁷ Viewing the proposed jump areas from the aircraft, the 503rd leadership gained specific knowledge on terrain features, tall trees that could interfere with parachute lines, and suitable sites for unit assembly after the paratroopers were on the ground. Even more importantly, they were able to determine the prevailing winds near the jump areas. The meteorological reports stated that winds in the Markham Valley were unusual: blowing down the valley until 1100 hours daily, they would suddenly reverse course and blow in the opposite direction. Fortunately for the 503rd, the reports proved timely and correct.⁶⁸

The Fifth Air Force airmen also conducted extensive preparations before the operation. The 54th Troop Carrier Wing, commanded by Colonel Paul H. Prentiss, carried the 503rd during parachute operations. Coordination between the two units resulted in better delivery methods and mission execution parameters. After much planning and preparation between the Fifth Air Force and the 503rd PIR staffs, they decided to use a formation of six planes staggered to the right with thirty seconds between elements in order to reduce chance of mid-air collisions while maximizing the widths of the drop zones.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Devlin, *Paratrooper!*, 260.

⁶⁷ James, *The Years of MacArthur*, 327.

⁶⁸ War Department, United States, *Report on "OUTLOOK OPERATION"*, 31 October 1943 (Port Moresby, New Guinea: Headquarters, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, 1943), 24.

⁶⁹ War Department, United States, *Report on "OUTLOOK OPERATION"*, 33.

Drawing on recent lessons from the parachute operations in Sicily, the Fifth Air Force practiced the entire mission for three straight days starting on 2 September. The veteran pilots knew all the details of the three major jump areas. Group commanders emphasized formation flying during rehearsals in order to ensure that the entire 503rd PIR landed accurately and together. Accuracy and mass made for much more efficient assembly on the drop zone and facilitated rapid movement to the assault objectives. Using an abandoned airstrip west of Port Moresby at Rorona, the aircrews conducted a full-scale trial run, concentrating on aerial checkpoints and verifying the forward and trailing edges of the paratroopers' drop zones. Fighter escorts in the form of A-20s and P-38s conducted their own rehearsals and determined the correct timing for firing on ground targets. B-25 bombers outfitted for close ground support participated in the rehearsals and grew comfortable with the mission plan. Several personnel flew with the carrier crews and conducted jumps in order to check the timing of the descent and the effects of wind.⁷⁰

The airborne operation succeeded in well-ordered fashion, but not without mishap. Three paratroopers died during the drop. Two fell to their deaths when their parachutes malfunctioned and one landed on a tall teakwood tree and fell sixty feet to the ground. Thirty-three minor injuries resulted from rough landing in addition to the three deaths. A small glitch also occurred with the jump by paratroopers of 3rd Battalion. The Nadzab operation commenced with battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel John Tolson's exit from the plane. Tolson would be the first American paratrooper to jump in a combat operation in the Pacific. His battalion, leading the regiment into Nadzab, executed the mission of landing on Field "C" and blocking the enemy to the east. As Tolson approached the drop zone, he recognized where he was from several reconnaissance flights with the Fifth Air Force's bomber runs. As the time approached for the jump, the exit door's red light blinked out. Failing to see the expected green light, Tolson waited

⁷⁰ Ibid., 33.

several seconds before jumping. The delay still allowed him to land in the middle of the drop zone, but the remainder of the battalion spread to the end of the open area and several landed in the trees at the edge. As it turns out, the navigator failed to switch on the green light after shutting off the red.⁷¹ The remainder of the regiment dropped accurately, but the paratroopers on the jump areas ran into their own obstacles. Razor-sharp kunai grass proved to be not only tall, but interlaced with jungle vine. Machetes came in handy as paratroopers hacked paths to unit assembly areas. After experiencing fog and light drizzle at the airstrip that morning, the paratroopers now plodded through stifling humidity and high temperatures. This proved to be the only resistance for the 503rd as they met no opposition on the ground. The Regiment's airborne arrival completely surprised the Japanese. As it turned out, the initial preparation fires by the B-25 strafing most likely would have destroyed any personnel in the open prior to the parachute drop. As an added bonus, the 503d's 2nd Battalion identified a worn trail that led from the jungle out onto their jump area. Marked every ten yards or so by a new bomb crater, the trail across the drop zone was an obvious tribute to the Fifth Air Force.⁷²

As the 503rd consolidated its gains in and around Nadzab, the 7th Australian Division advanced down the Markham Valley in order to attack the Japanese at Lae from the west. At the same time, the 9th Australian Division pressed the attack from the east. With the growing pressure on Lae, the reinforcements to Salamaua ended. The 5th Australian Division and the American 41st Division occupied Salamaua on 13 September, and three days later the 7th and 9th Australian Divisions converged on Lae.⁷³

Based on MacArthur's guidance, the 503rd PIR remained near Nadzab with a defensive mission around the captured airstrip. The Australians did not employ the 503rd PIR in offensive

⁷¹ Ibid., 35.

⁷² Breuer, *Geronimo!*, 67.

⁷³ War Department, United States, *Report on "OUTLOOK OPERATION"*, 31 October 1943, 40.

operations based on MacArthur's prior directive stressing his preference for not wanting parachute troops executing the duties of already available regular infantry troops. More specifically, MacArthur directed that after relief by supporting troops, parachute units should be withdrawn to prepare for future operations. With its mission complete on September 17, the 503rd PIR conducted redeployment to Port Moresby and arrived back at its base camp on September 19.⁷⁴

The Nadzab airborne operation fulfilled the Weapon System Evaluation Group's definition for success. First of all, the air effort succeeded due to the combination of air support, detailed rehearsals, and accurate execution of the jump. During this period, planners agreed that parachute drops required air superiority and the Fifth Air Force provided more than ample defensive measures for both the troop carrier fleet and for the ground operation. The use of reconfigured bombers and a heavy contingent of fighter escort aircraft virtually guaranteed control of airspace around Nadzab. This in turn allowed the 503rd to jump mid-morning on the day of the operation. Daylight conditions also permitted the aircrews to conduct an extensive and accurate preparation of the objective area. Finally, the daylight operation facilitated the accurate drop of the entire regiment—the most accurate in the American military to date. The airborne effort succeeded as well. The plan called for seizing objectives in a certain time frame and the 503rd delivered. Within two hours of landing on Nadzab, the paratroopers secured all of their assault objectives. In less than a day's time from the initial parachute drop, the Nadzab airstrip was operational—all according to the plan.

Success required that the airborne operation accomplish its stated and planned purpose, and the success of the overall maneuver, measured in terms of the accomplishment of ultimate purpose, was dependent on the performance of the airborne forces.⁷⁵ The airborne operation

⁷⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 41.

allowed the 7th Australian Division to seize Lae. Without the capture of Nadzab, that Australians needed to make a hazardous cross-country movement to approach Lae. This alternative meant a high consumption of time and combat power. Subsequently, the 9th Australian Division depended on the 7th's success. And without the 7th, the 9th Australian Division would not have been able to capture Lae single-handedly. In addition to seizing the Nadzab airstrip, the 503rd PIR effectively blocked the Markham Valley from Japanese reinforcement.

The Nadzab airborne operation experienced few of the failures that plagued earlier parachute drops. As of this time, virtually none of the doctrine for large-scale airborne operations had been codified. In essence, the 503rd began to formulate this emerging doctrine as operations commenced. Under these circumstances, the 503rd leadership successfully planned and executed the Nadzab parachute drop. The operation exhibited the principles of mass and effective employment as a theater option for the commander. Realistic and thorough joint rehearsals characterized the preparations. Air superiority added to the punch and shaped the operation by providing the conditions for a daylight drop. This in turn allowed the accurate and massed placement of the paratroopers.

The Nadzab operation heavily influenced the deliberations of the Swing Board, the special panel chaired by General Joseph Swing to evaluate the airborne operations in Sicily for the Chief of Staff of the Army and recommend changes in training, doctrine and employment principles. Since HUSKY I had soured the appetites of many for unfavorable reports on airborne operations, Airborne Command and War Department officials warmly received the news of Nadzab's success.⁷⁶ By now, Although the doctrine for large-scale airborne operations was still in development during 1943, the examples of Sicily and Nadzab provided valuable lessons that would shape basic doctrine. HUSKY I demonstrated how not to conduct such an operation.

⁷⁶ Weapons System Evaluation Group, *WSEG Staff Study no. 3: Historical Study of some World War II Airborne Operations*, 23.

Nadzab, on the other hand, was an inspiring case study of how vertical envelopment should be executed. It was now the 11th Airborne Division's turn to influence airborne operations and demonstrate the successful execution of missions in the Pacific.

Para-glidermen in Action: The 11th Airborne in Combined Operations

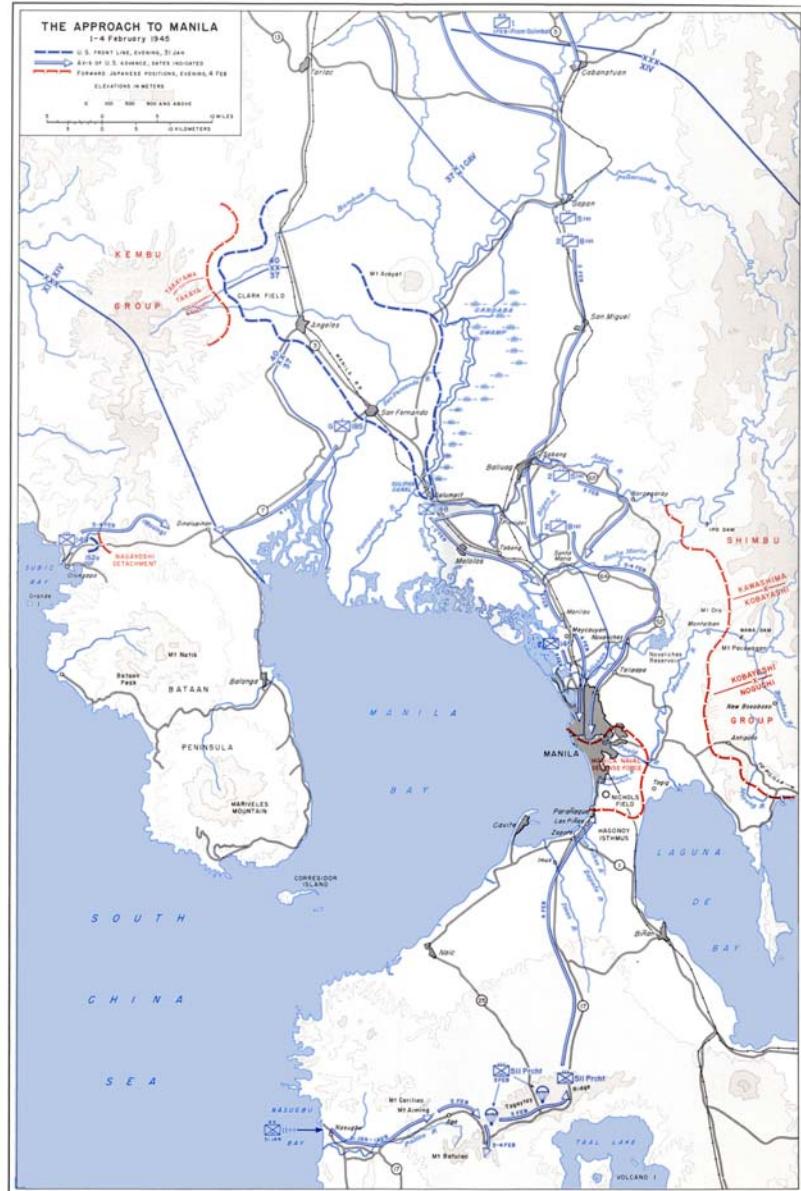
The 11th Airborne Division's first foray into combat proved to be a rather conventional parachute drop combined with a more sophisticated amphibious operation. In order to support amphibious invasion forces from the 6th and 8th Armies on the Philippine island of Luzon, the 11th would jump onto a barren ridge several miles inland from the invasion beaches and capture key road junctions that led toward the city of Manila. While the 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment jumped onto drop zones along the ridge, glider personnel from the 187th and 188th would accompany ground forces in the amphibious landing.⁷⁷ Having never conducted an amphibious landing before, the glidermen were about to experience an entirely new side of warfare. Even here, Swing's unorthodox mindset fostered the kind of flexible thinking required of troops experiencing unusual combat conditions.

The actual jump onto the Tagaytay Ridge met with immediate success. Lieutenant Colonel L. A. Walsh, Jr., an observer assigned by the Airborne Command at Camp Mackall to analyze and report on airborne operations in the Pacific Theater, offered a detailed account of the preparations and execution of the jump. His report included a description of his reception into the Pacific Theater and his eventual assignment as the 511th's "tactical executive officer" for the immediate operation.⁷⁸ Swing, and his Chief of Staff Colonel Irvin Schimmelpfenig, agreed that Walsh's leadership experience in airborne units might be welcome in the event that casualties

⁷⁷ War Department, United States, *Report on "OUTLOOK OPERATION"*, 31 October 1943, 67.

⁷⁸ 6th U. S. Army, *Report of the Luzon Campaign, 9 January 1945 to 30 June 1945* (Manila, Philippines: United States Sixth Army, 1989), 12.

created vacancies in the regimental leadership. Ironically, the 511th's commander Colonel Orin Haugen would be killed in action not long after Walsh's return to the States after his assignment. Haugen, and Schimmelpfenig before him, would be the only senior American leaders killed in the entire Philippines Campaign.⁷⁹



Map 6—The Approach to Manila, 1-4 February 1945 used by permission from inside back cover Robert Ross Smith, *United States Army in World War II The War in the Pacific Triumph in the Philippines*

⁷⁹ L. A. Walsh, *Report of the Campaign on Luzon, Airborne Operations in the Pacific Ocean Areas, 13 April 1945* (Pearl Harbor, Hawaii: Headquarters, United States es Pacific Ocean Areas, 1945), 3.

The sequence of events leading to the Tagaytay drop follows. The 11th Airborne Division, operating under Eighth Army control had, on 31 January 1945, accomplished an amphibious landing at Nasugbu on the western side of the Batangas Peninsula of Luzon, South of Cavite, with the glider elements of the division. Immediately following the first assault waves on Nasugbu, Eighth Army alerted the 511th to an airborne operation East (in front of) the amphibiously landed elements which were proceeding in the same direction against moderate opposition. The Eighth Army's commander gave these forces the mission of assisting the capture of Manila by attack from the South.⁸⁰

The parachute elements (511th PIR) of the 11th were, on this date, marshaled on Mindoro. Walsh proceeded to Mindoro, arriving the night of 23 February and reported to Colonel Haugen. Haugen, following Swing's intent for Walsh's visit, assigned him as the 511th's Tactical Executive Officer (TXO). Haugen's assigned XO would remain behind at one of the airstrips to coordinate the logistical effort and act as a rear echelon liaison to the troop carrier group. At 3 AM on 3 February, the parachute regiment proceeded by truck to the two base airstrips, designated Hill and Elmore, in the vicinity of the town of San Jose, Mindoro, picking up parachutes along the way. The aircrews had parked the planes in close formation, in double column. Each truckload proceeded to its assigned plane, loaded organizational equipment, adjusted parachute harnesses and individual equipment, and awaited take-off.⁸¹

Take-off was scheduled for and commenced at 7 AM, just as the morning showed its first hints of light. After a rendezvous above the airstrips, the fleet of Douglas C-47 "Skytrains" adopted a close V of V's formation and proceeded on course at an altitude of six hundred feet. During marshalling, Northrop P-61C "Black Widows" (a night-fighting and rather large version

⁸⁰ Gordon L. Rottman, *U.S. Airborne Units in the Pacific Theater: 1942-45* (New York: Osprey, 2007), 33.

⁸¹ Walsh, *Report of the Campaign on Luzon, Airborne Operations in the Pacific Ocean Areas, 13 April 1945*, 3.

of the double-tailed P-38) provided fighter cover. As they had at Nadzab, Douglas A-20 "Havocs" preceded the drop, attacking enemy forces west of the drop zone. P-38s provided fighter cover during the rendezvous, approach, and return of the transport aircraft.⁸²

Other than a slight tail wind which caused an early arrival of about fifteen minutes, the approach flight to the initial point was uneventful. The drop zone was on Tagaytay Ridge, slightly north and West of Lake Taal. At an elevation of two thousand feet, the ridge's surface was rolling, cultivated countryside. The only hazard was the ridge's southern slope which angled down steeply to the floodplain. Similar to the 101st and 82nd's experience over Normandy, the 11th's final approach to the drop zones met with a solid cloud bank which completely covered the ridge at about five hundred feet. At this point, the ridge's southern cliff and recognizable landmarks were hidden from view.⁸³ Effective low level navigation by the leading aircraft, coupled with the good fortune of a break in the clouds at the critical moment over final check point at Highway 17, enabled the leading squadron to drop its paratroopers on the drop zone specified by the mission's order. Succeeding flights, while making it over the ridge, dropped from three to five miles short of their designated drop zones. Usually, airborne divisions deployed pathfinder teams to set the conditions for a successful, accurate landing of parachutists on drop zones. Equipped with radio beacons and lighting materials, pathfinders marked out the leading and trail edges of drop zones in order to assist flight crews and paratroopers in identifying the precise drop points. In the case of Tagaytay, no pathfinder echelon preceded the drop, but personnel of the division reconnaissance platoon had previously infiltrated through Japanese lines and had ignited smoke signals on the drop zones.⁸⁴ While the smoke went unseen due to the

⁸² Ibid., 4.

⁸³ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 5.

cloud bank, the plumes assisted the members of the regiment once they had landed and searched for the assembly areas.

Once assembled, the work was cut out for them. Division staff assigned the RCT three missions:

First, to make ground contact with the remainder of the division held up at a deep gorge approximately three miles to the West;

Second, to secure the length of the ridge (approximately seven miles) for subsequent landings;

Third, to seize and hold the highway junction where the ridge road, Highway Number 25 joined Highway Number 17 leading north to Manila.⁸⁵

Assisted somewhat by the scattered nature of the drop, which was unopposed by the Japanese, the regiment accomplished all three missions within two hours. The enemy forces between the 511th and the division withdrew to the hills when thus enveloped. Swing and the Division Command Post moved to the Government House in the vicinity of Lake Taal, and the operations staff concentrated on the division's reorganization during the remainder of the day, while several companies secured the narrow supply route east from the beachhead at Nasugbu. During the night of 3/4 February, lead elements of the 511th made contact with a small Japanese patrol attempting to infiltrate from the East.⁸⁶

At dawn the next day, the Division, with the 511th in the lead, moved North on Manila Highway 17, via Silang, Imus, Las Pinas, and Paranaque. A few two-and-a-half ton trucks and jeeps provided a motorized advanced patrol. G Company first gained contact that day at noon at Imus. Surprised by the Division's rapid march along the highway, the Japanese destroyed one of two bridges over the Imus River before barricading themselves in a fortress-like church. The Division's Chief of Staff, Colonel Schimmelpfenig, joined Haugen in a search for a suitable bypass, but was soon killed trying to cross the street in front of the church. Eventually, troops

⁸⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁶ Army, *Report of the Luzon Campaign, 9 January 1945 to 30 June 1945*, 54.

located a bypass and the 511th left a platoon to destroy the remnants of Japanese in and around the church grounds. The Division reported eighty-four enemy dead.⁸⁷

The 11th's rapid advance toward Manilla enabled the Eighth Army to concentrate on clearing pockets of Japanese resistance left over after the initial amphibious landing. After several days, the Eighth's commander relinquished control of the 11th Airborne Division back to its normal parent unit, General Walter Krueger's Sixth Army. The Luzon Campaign now depended on the ability of the 1st Cavalry Division and the 11th Airborne to establish contact and seize several key objectives. In and around greater Manila, Nichols Field and Fort McKinley became prime targets for the mutual effort of the two divisions.⁸⁸ Close cooperation between a ground infantry division and an airborne unit resulted in the capture of the two objectives, enabling Sixth Army to stage large numbers of aircraft and supplies within arm's reach of Manila's center.

By 23 February 1945 the invasion of Luzon was well in hand and a slack in the pace of operations presented opportunities to focus on peripheral tactics and smaller actions.⁸⁹ After finding several escaped prisoners-of-war (POW), Army leadership on the Philippines began to realize that the plight of these abused and malnourished troops required immediate attention. Although whole divisions and regiments could not simply attack forward and liberate the remaining camps, opportunities arose to send small, specialized units to infiltrate Japanese lines and rescue prisoner populations.⁹⁰ The tricky missions presented various dilemmas to leaders on Luzon. They realized that close proximity to U.S. fighting forces could prompt Japanese reprisals on the prisoners—death being the most likely—while chances to raid camps were fleeting as

⁸⁷ Joseph B. Seay, "The 11th Airborne Division in the Leyte Mountain Operation," *Military Review* XXIX (Oct. 1949), 16.

⁸⁸ Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines*, 217.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*: 17.

⁹⁰ Army, *Report of the Luzon Campaign, 9 January 1945 to 30 June 1945*, 134.

enemy troop movements constantly shifted with the oncoming tide of Americans.⁹¹ Camp raiding proved a risky business and required planning of the most detailed nature.

It still remains unclear who instigated the planning process that assigned the mission to rescue the prisoners at the Los Banos Internment Camp to the 11th Airborne Division. Nonetheless, the Pacific Theater's only division-level airborne outfit made ready to raid the camp and rescue the inmates, the occupations of whom varied from U.S. servicemen, doctors and nurses, to missionaries of American and Filipino origin. This conglomeration of individuals presented interesting and challenging planning factors as General Swing's staff began formulating a course of action.

The division commander task-organized various elements from within the division in order to maximize participation across the occupational specialties. Glider troops would form the bulk of the diversionary force while B Company from the 511th would conduct an early morning combat jump in order to achieve surprise among the Japanese guard outposts. The remainder of the 511th crossed a nearby lake by Amtrac (amphibious tractors) and reinforced B Company at the decisive point in the raid. The tractors also served as a method of evacuation for liberated prisoners.⁹²

During the actual raid, the approximately two thousand prisoners within the camp began milling around in confusion. For the soldiers taking part in the raid, this mass of humanity presented a problem of enormous proportions as they sought positions from which to defend against Japanese counterattacks. Fire control proved impossible without first handling the prisoners and coordinating their orderly exit from the area. The raid succeeded only after designated soldiers organized groups of prisoners and marched them off in a quick and orderly

⁹¹ Sides, *Ghost Soldiers*, 21.

⁹² E. M. Flanagan, *The Los Banos Raid: The 11th Airborne Jumps at Dawn* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1986), 12.

fashion. Instead of consuming the most time in planning, the evacuation plan for liberated personnel often took a back seat to combat operations. Interestingly enough, transporting POWs proved to be the most unconventional aspect of an operation. The varying medical conditions of the evacuees required certain special capabilities, many of which lay outside the purview of the units conducting camp raids. The 11th Airborne proved to be the most prepared in the case of Los Banos, with each AMTRAC carrying medical personnel prepared to treat sick and feeble POWs on the movement back to U.S. lines.⁹³

In the end, Lieutenant Colonel Walsh's report of the activities of the 11th Airborne Operation prompted a great deal of action on the part of the War Department and the Airborne Forces in general. As the war in Europe drew to a close in May of 1945, leaders were anxious to hear how the 82nd and 101st might be employed in the Pacific. Walsh considered several aspects of the use of airborne forces in the Pacific to sum up his observations. He maintained that the Pacific Theater was fertile ground for further airborne employment. For Walsh, "Certain Japanese characteristics repeatedly demonstrated in combat lead me to the conclusion that the potential for Airborne Forces in this theater is infinite."⁹⁴ He elaborated on the fact that the imaginative operational control of the Airborne-Troop Carrier Forces that redeployment can make available could influence the outcome of the war against Japan in a manner vastly out of proportion to the numbers of troops engaged.⁹⁵ He also noted aspects of geography. The Japanese mainland is mountainous and split by numerous corridors with narrow bottlenecks, and while the rough terrain made for hazardous drop zones, the bottlenecks offered ideal airborne objectives. Areas sufficient in size for large scale airborne operations existed and the rugged surface benefited the defense, particularly against mechanized attack against which lightly equipped airborne forces

⁹³ Ibid. 120.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 42.

were most vulnerable.⁹⁶ Considering nothing else, the Japanese reaction to envelopment of his flanks and rear—the focus of airborne employment—would alone have justified large-scale and continuous use of airborne forces in the operations against the mainland of Japan.⁹⁷ But Walsh remained cautiously optimistic:

Nothing herein is intended to imply that there exists any simple cure-all for the conquest of Japan. It must of necessity be bloody and expensive. However, a sincere analysis cannot avoid the firm conviction that the cost could be materially reduced in both lives and time by a bold, imaginative, continuous application of the airborne potential.⁹⁸

At the end of his report, Walsh recommended that all available airborne forces be deployed to the Pacific Theater to include the as yet un-deployed 541st Parachute Infantry Regiment and a liaison team from the Airborne Command Center to assist with immediate needs as they arose.⁹⁹ Since a liaison team had already existed in Europe for two full years, it would appear that in most instances, the airborne forces in the Pacific operated with the tools at hand and came to rely on a firm idea of cooperation with regular forces. This stood in stark contrast to the airborne divisions in Europe who often trained, worked, and lived in relative seclusion.

The large jumps into Normandy and Holland preceded most of the 11th's actions in the Philippines. Because of this fact, the lessons learned from these huge operations enabled the 11th Airborne and the 503rd to tailor their training and preparations to not only meet the complex needs of an airborne force, but to allow them to build on the experiences in the Pacific. The Europe experience did not always translate easily to the circumstance in the Philippines. Thus, the Pacific's airborne leadership culled what they could out of the evidence and shaped their unique operations with certain details in mind. Dropping close to objectives always paid good dividends.

⁹⁵ Walsh, *Report of the Campaign on Luzon, Airborne Operations in the Pacific Ocean Areas, 13 April 1945*, 39.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 126.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 126.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 127.

What better way to make use of the concept than by incorporating it into plans to raid POW camps? The forces in Europe never really grasped the intricacies of this process. Instead of employing airborne units in liberation efforts, ETO commanders relied on unimaginative and hasty planning with disastrous results. The Hammelburg Raid in Germany, where General George Patton attempted an ill-advised ground rescue of American prisoners that included his son-in-law, bears out this fact. Not only did the 11th succeed at Los Banos, but the division accomplished the mission quite rapidly and added to their growing reputation in the process.

Neither the 503rd nor the 11th experienced friction with their respective Air Transport Groups. The European divisions stood to learn a great deal from the experience of these two Pacific units. They proved that tight integration with the C-47 crews was possible as long as it started at the beginning of mission planning. Nadzab demonstrated the value of detailed rehearsals at the flight crew level and the fact that paratroops could easily participate with them in this phase of an operation. Realistic and detailed rehearsals reduce the hazards of an otherwise complex and risky mission.

The 11th's subsequent history invites reflection as well. Prior to the official surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay Pacific planners mulled over the possibility of armed resistance in the city and, as the holstered revolver on the theater commander's hip, the 11th became a key component of planning for airfield seizure and forcible-entry operations in urban Tokyo. Dubbed BAKER-SIXTY, the plan never made it beyond the classification of "staff study" as intelligence would make it clear that the Tokyo population presented a low threat.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, the option existed in the form of a unit with unique capabilities. Following surrender, the 11th Airborne absorbed the 503rd in order to fill out the Division and make it a viable occupation force.

¹⁰⁰ United States Armed Forces Pacific, Staff Study: Operation BAKER-SIXTY (Washington D.C.: 1945), 3.

The 11th Airborne went on to participate in the occupation of Japan for several years before its assignment to similar duties in Germany. After official deactivation at Fort Campbell, Kentucky in the mid-1950s, the 11th ceased to be an active unit. But this state only existed for a short time. The Army made plans to adopt a new method of warfare in the form of the air assault concept. The increasingly prolific helicopter drew a great deal of interest in the late 1950s and early 1960s to the extent that the military thought it prudent to establish a test division. The Army reactivated the 11th in order to fill this role and thus was born the 11th Air Assault Test Division at Fort Campbell. As Vietnam loomed, the 11th provided cadre to give the 1st Cavalry Division a base of experience in air assault operations. Soon after, these men would ride into the Ia Drang Valley on Huey helicopters and attack the might of the North Vietnamese head on. The 11th would prove to be a versatile platform for experimentation.¹⁰¹

Airborne Operations in a Global Environment: Some Conclusions

This study explored several examples from various combat actions, ground campaigns, and combat parachute jumps conducted in the Pacific Theater in World War II. In certain ways, some actions were similar to those conducted in Europe while others differed remarkably and required unique planning and preparation factors. As many of the units trained and experienced initial conditions in the same, if not identical environments (nearly every parachute regiment began under the auspices of the United States Army's Airborne Command and conducted basic training at Camp Toccoa, Georgia), the destination of their subsequent deployments meant that they would apply their training in different ways and in different contexts.

But history fails to offer pat answers. The World War II experience cannot possibly speak directly to every problem of today, and soldiers rarely find the exact replica in that war of a

¹⁰¹ John M. Carland, *How We Got Here: Air Assault Warfare and the Emergence of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), 1950-1965* (Arlington, VA: Institute of Land Warfare, 2003), 12.

current military situation. After all, a thorough study of military history reveals that every battle and campaign possesses unique characteristics. However, general situations exist in the study of military matters that deserve investigation in every era, and strategic and operational planning staffs will likely encounter situations with historical similarities. For example, in a study focused almost exclusively on Europe in World War II, Anthony Tata explored the use of airborne forces in the area of operational maneuver in the early 1990s.¹⁰² Tata concluded that airborne forces “seem best suited for seizing bases of operations and extending culminating points.”¹⁰³ He is largely correct. However, his argument narrowly focuses on operations such as MARKET GARDEN and NEPTUNE to justify the main argument. Broaching the subject of Pacific operations offers a much more flexible and optimistic framework with which to examine the usefulness of airborne troops. Ultimately, an exploration of Pacific Airborne operations reveals certain conclusions.

First, operational distances in the Pacific tended to aggravate logistical problems for airborne units, forcing planning staffs to find ways around the limitations. The Marine Corps made use of its available airborne forces either in augmentation roles or as key elements of deception operations designed to provide protection for major amphibious invasions. The experiments met with success, but not without cost. The Marines wisely tabled the idea of a separate brigade-sized parachute unit at a time when amphibious warfare began to shape much of the Pacific strategy and contemporary Corps operational thinking. It made a certain amount of common sense to emulate the German operational success during the drive through the European lowlands in 1940. The initial enthusiasm allowed Marine planners to explore options, but it also led them to discover the difficulties of sustaining an air movement capability in a blue water

¹⁰² Anthony Tata, “The Airborne Force in Operational Maneuver,” (SAMS Monograph, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1993), 1.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 34.

environment with limited resources. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Force Reconnaissance concept kept the idea of airborne forces in the Corps alive in limited fashion. The units were small, focused, self-sustaining to a degree, and added specialized capabilities to Marine expeditionary teams. However, the 21st Century has brought with it a passion for joint special operations forces, leaving Marine task forces without a deep, ground-based observation capability. Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) has absorbed many of the personnel from Force Reconnaissance units. In the future, the Corps would do well to retain these units at the division level as a critical force multiplier for both amphibious and land-based maneuvers.

Second, the airborne experience in the Pacific Theater in World War II illustrated the problems of force projection, small unit employment, and joint warfare from an interesting perspective. The 503rd practiced joint maneuvers early in the mission preparation process and worked through difficulties well before execution. Not wedded to the idea that a parachute force operated alone and as an isolated elite force, the leadership of the 503rd welcomed cooperation from the air branch and realized that success rested on this close relationship. General Swing's 11th constantly exercised non-branch specific missions that required every soldier to be a paratrooper, gliderman, and amphibious warrior. However, this is not to imply that innovative solutions always came by way of leadership intervention. Operations in the Pacific provided unique opportunities. The physical nature of the theater was wholly different from that of Europe. Island seizure provided a perfect testing ground for parachute operations conducted in concert with amphibious landings. Furthermore, the isolated nature of various campaigns forced units to exercise non-traditional means of transportation, re-supply, and command and control. Put simply, the ingenuity and penchant for innovation in American culture found fertile ground in the Pacific, especially among the paratroopers.

Third, operational thought in the American Armed Forces retains a rich heritage in the Pacific experience. Contrary to the current fashion in military circles which maintains that the American military suffers from a lack of operational vision, the military history of the United

States actually reveals a rather sophisticated record of operational thought and incumbent success. The increasing constriction of Japanese forces in the Central and Southwest Pacific in the final two years of World War II reveals a measured and logical response on the part of theater commanders and planners. With a variety of options to work from, Pacific staffs took certain capabilities such as amphibious operations, vertical envelopment, and conventional ground maneuver and combined them to create a viable operational strategy. Units whose leadership remained flexible and adaptive throughout the long march to the Japanese home islands found themselves executing a wide variety of missions. The airborne forces were especially suited for operational flexibility and, in most cases, rapidly adapted to meet the intent of theater leadership.

At the same time, the experience of the 503rd PIR and 11th Airborne Division enabled planners in the Pacific to envision an operational endstate which had the capability to incorporate these specialized units in a peace-enforcement role. While the initial occupation proved overwhelmingly peaceful, contingency plans such as BAKER-SIXTY proved to be yet another demonstration of the usefulness of airborne troops in that cloudy phase of conflict in between the militarily declared end-of-hostilities and the actual institution of surrender terms. Fortunately, the 11th Airborne's planned jump onto airfields and various portions of the urban landscape of Tokyo to establish security never took place. But if the 11th had executed the operation, flexible and adaptive units stood ready to engage in operations in a "full-spectrum" environment.

Finally, this study also offers a word of caution. The U.S. military must remember the Pacific airborne experience simply because this heritage provides a template for future training and preparations for major combat operations. Globally-projected forces remain a chief characteristic of the contemporary operational environment and with few signs that the pace is slackening, airborne operations will have an undisputed role in future conflicts. World powers with regional security interests continue to step up efforts to equip and train specialized forces with parachute and air assault capabilities—a reminder that the U.S. Military must look to the future and do the same.

China's fascination with airborne troops began in the early 1990s as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) began to field separate parachute brigades. There are economists who believe that these developments were among the first indicators of China's desire to rise to prominence in the new century.¹⁰⁴ Much of this is posturing. The airborne mystique has no doubt contributed to the concept's use as a status symbol among rising powers. However, parachute troops remain a highly useful and practical capability for nations with littoral interests. While it may take years for China to develop a sophisticated and globally-projected force, it holds the potential now to deploy robust, brigade-sized troops to various points in the Pacific Basin. In a positive sense, this could mean a greater degree of peace-keeping involvement on the part of the Chinese in troubled areas like the Solomons or the Marshalls. On the down side, recent events in Tibet indicate that rosy outcomes are unlikely to follow from Chinese interventions any time soon. Major shifts in the Chinese political environment must precede any positive developments in either law enforcement or military operations.

Fortunately, the United States continues to train and equip both air assault and airborne forces. And while counterinsurgency appears to occupy the mission essential task list of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions in at least the short term, the horizon remains blurry and could mask the fact that more interventions are forthcoming—interventions that may require rapid air movement of all types. As a nod to the para-glider past in the Pacific, a consolidated air transportable division, including parachute and heli-borne units, could meet the need for a strategic and operationally flexible force package. As they have in the past, situations will arise that require the deployment of units marked by a certain cultural prestige and a visible, forceful presence.

As rising powers watch, and often emulate, U.S. military actions, this study contends that the American military culture can look back on a positive record of performance and innovation.

¹⁰⁴ "Silk and Steel," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 156, no. 40 (10/07 1993), 9.

However, the history of America's experiment and fascination with airborne forces remains incomplete without comprehensive coverage of its exploits in the Pacific. Combat jumps and glider operations in the Pacific faced truly unique sets of circumstances and the fact that the war itself finally ended in this theater meant that specialized units would play major roles in the occupation of the conquered nation. All of these ingredients combine to form a truly unique facet of American military history.

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